GRAVITY OF PERCEPTION

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LORENZO TRIBURGO
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February 20, 6 pm

XAVIERA SIMMONS
Artist Talk
March 15, 6 pm

KRIS GRAVES & ZORA MURFF
Artist Talk
March 21, 6 pm

THROUGH
MARCH 23

image: Tya Alisa Anthony,
Two of Cups, 2019

TYA ANTHONY  • MARCELLA ERNEST • KRIS GRAVES •  ZORA MURFF
XAVIERA SIMMONS • LORENZO TRIBURGO • KRISTA WORTENDYKE
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PICK US UP AT

Buffalo Exchange
226 E. 13th Ave
51 Broadway

Center For Visual Art
965 Santa Fe Drive

DATELINE Gallery
3004 Larimer St.

RedLine Gallery
2350 Arapahoe St.

Fluid Coffee Bar
501 E. 19th Ave.

Tattered Cover Bookstore
1628 16th St.
2526 E. Colfax Ave.

Auraria Campus
Arts Building
Auraria Library
King Center
Emmanuel Gallery
Immigrant Services
Tivoli Brewing Co.
Tivoli Station, 300 Level

The Bardo Coffee House
238 S. Broadway

The Market at Larimer Square
1445 Larimer St.

The Molecule Effect
1201 Santa Fe Drive, Suite A

Racine’s
650 Sherman St.
STOP
by Estevan Ruiz
2019
This process of producing a magazine has proven to be a challenging experience for all four of our staff. The good news is that we have a lot of freedom to produce and publish the content that we do. With that being said, I am incredibly proud of what we have achieved so far and with the overall outcome of our second issue of “Metrosphere.” We've received so much praise for our first issue—especially from Denver’s art community.

I think this is a testament to having two designers produce a specialized product—no offense to my journalist colleagues. It’s not just about having ‘nice’ graphics and layout. It’s so much more about engaging our creative audience, considering their experience and representation within our magazine. Culture has a lot to do with it as well. Creative Director Joseph Hatfield and I grew up with our hands in several different creative outlets from music and photography, to illustration and design. This is what’s allowed us to be more thoughtful with our production of “Metrosphere”—for artists, by artists.

We’ve worked our asses off to put this issue together. Our focus for this issue is all about narrative and how that plays a role into artmaking. All our submissions are literary and the one thing we didn’t want to do was copy and paste text into a white page. Instead, we decided to supplement the writings with complementary visuals—with the exception of Madison Faulkner’s wonderfully produced typographic zine (pg. 70).

We primarily utilized photography to capture everything presented. From lighting paper on fire in an alley on 16th Street Mall, buying found photographs from the Mile High Flea Market, using items from our pockets as subject matter to create a pseudo CD album, hand-crafted headlines, to making our own fortune cookies, it’s been a lot of work, but a lot of fun in the process. I of course, cannot forget to mention how great our interviews are too. I had the opportunity to talk to a very productive and enthusiastic art student, Lucas Stine, artist and new professor brimming with passion, Leslie Boyd, and alumna and emerging author, Kali Fajardo.

I hope you find these interviews as inspiring as I did conducting them. I also hope you like what we did visually this time around. We’re excited and anxious to see how people react to them. We’re definitely stepping things up and getting more adventurous with this publication. I am grateful for the opportunity to be editor-in-chief and to work with a small group of hard working individuals.

Here’s to the next one.

Editor-in-Chief
Estevan Ruiz
SUBMISSION

SHADOW PHOENIX

WRITTEN BY SARAH SMITH
ARTWORK BY METROSPHERE
To some,
*darkness is pure evil,*
*the devil.*

To me,
*darkness is my savior.*
It’s my savior, because it
lets me really be me.
The me without the stone
walls, the fake smiles,
the perfect everything,
the absolute nothing.

*Just me.*
It will let me sit in its company, but won’t impose. It will offer its comfort without speaking a word. It won’t judge me or ridicule me. It won’t taunt me or laugh at me. The only thing it will do is be.

I can let all my walls crumble to the ground. I can let my mind wander into the deepest and darkest of fantasies.

I can be the darkness.
I can also be the phoenix.
The best and the worst of it all. At my peak, full of a blazing fire and passion that can make even the gods of old stop and notice me. At my low, a pile of ash and nothingness that even the smallest creature that walks this earth wouldn’t see.
The wondrous thing is that in time, that pile of ash and nothingness will make way for a being that can once again become the fire and passion. Just as that awe-inspiring being will yet again become the pile of ash.

It’s all a circle. Give to take, to give again. Live to die, to live again. Love to lose, to love yet again.
I am the blackest of black. 
The cold of the night. The death breathing down your neck. 
I am the darkness. 
I am also the whitest of white. 
The sun at high noon. The fire burning in your breast. 
I am the phoenix.
I am the Shadowphoenix.

Io sono l’ombra della fenice.
Fortune cookies remind me of late nights, cheap wine, steamed rice and curiosity. The satisfying crunch of cracking open its smooth surface and pulling out a small fortune destined for our eyes only provokes feelings of nostalgia, of believing in magic, of simpler times. Most Americans consider this confection a staple with their Chinese take-out, despite the cookie’s Japanese-American roots. I used to collect the small slips in a ceramic jar, each fortune a souvenir from first dates, family lunches and sleepovers; the generic, overly optimistic phrases applicable to the most mundane of life events. However, my collection of fortunes no longer exists, and the innocent excitement of receiving one has long faded. Fortunes such as “A smile is your passport into the hearts of others” or “You will become great if you believe in yourself” sound more demeaning than inspiring to those having a bad day. I created Misfortune Cookies to better relate to the most pessimistic of events, to portray the lows as equally as the highs of life, and perhaps to provide advice or a much-needed reminder to those who need it.

There are several theories on the possible origins of fortune cookies, but all are inspired by hope, gratitude and encouragement. The most popular origin theory comes from the early 1900s, where Japanese immigrant Makoto Hagiwara worked as a designer and gardener at the Japanese Tea Garden in Golden State Park, located in San Francisco. After losing his job under a discriminatory mayor, Hagiwara received support from his friends and was later reinstated to his former position by the next mayor. To show his gratitude, he baked small cookies made from sesame and miso and placed a small note within the cookie’s fold to thank those that had helped him through his unemployment. He continued to serve the cookies at the tea garden, sharing words of wisdom and kindness with visitors. I’m sure Hagiwara’s fortunes were more sincere and heartfelt compared to today’s fortunes, such as “You love Chinese food!” I once found in one of my cookies.

Who continues to determine the fate of our fortune cookie experience anyway? Donald Lau of Wonton Food Company considers himself to be “the most read author in the United States,” and has written fortunes for the world’s largest fortune cookie manufacturer for over 30 years. Steven Yang, of Yang’s Fortunes Incorporated, is another creator of these small prophecies, having employed his young daughter.
Don’t get out of bed today!
to write most of the fortunes. While the fortunes within these cookies have changed consistently over the years, their purpose and meaning remain the same: ambiguous, inoffensive, and relatable content to inspire conversation and a sense of fulfillment after a good meal.

The unique history of these cookies is accompanied with modern superstitions that insist on certain steps to ensure the fortune comes true. When the Lo Mein noodles are gone, and the leftover sesame chicken is put away, be sure to choose the cookie farthest from your place at the table with its two ends pointed in your direction. Take extra care to keep your fortune intact, for ripping the small white paper will disqualify it; so will sharing your fortune with those around you or throwing it away in an anti-climactic disappointment. Recently, a friend told me that instead of eating the cookie, she eats the fortune and throws the cookie away—redefining what makes a fortune come true. Some believe that a blank fortune or empty cookie is a bad omen, but those who work with Lau on making the cookies have claimed the opposite. Maybe this is just an excuse for a lack of quality control on the factory’s part, but this superstition aligns with the cookie’s main purpose of providing encouragement and joy to those who crack them open.

Unlucky fortunes are almost impossible to receive from most cookies, and their vague messages are written to apply to anyone that may find a fortune in their hands. However, their popular status in American take-out and impact on cultural superstitions show that fortune cookies are here to stay. Unlike tarot cards and fortune-tellers, fortune cookies aim to please and compliment their consumers; not exactly a guaranteed or realistic prediction of future events. Perhaps a little more honesty and bluntness in fortune cookies would be more appropriate for life’s unfortunate events, and Misfortune Cookies do just that. Despite their pessimistic tone, they may provide a more realistic prediction on the current state of your life—or at least, make you laugh. What would your misfortune cookie say?
Stress and debt will follow you closely wherever you go!
You will live an average life.
Whatever it is you’re looking for, you won’t find it here.
You could probably be a better friend.
Much of the jewelry that people wear carry some sort of sentimental value. Whether it be a wedding ring or a bracelet passed down from a grandparent, jewelry are metal items that last for generations and inform a legacy. For MSU Denver instructor and jewelry artist Leslie Boyd, jewelry serves as a platform to make a statement and evoke critical thought. Aside from her social commentary and advocacy through the medium, Leslie is a passionate educator who seeks to empower students through concept and discourse. I had the pleasure of speaking with Leslie on Jan. 10 at her shared studio in Capitol Hill. We talked about what sparked her interest in becoming an educator, the function of wearable items, the conceptual themes behind her works and why community is so important for artists.
Estevan Ruiz: You joined MSU Denver this past year as assistant professor and area coordinator of the Jewelry Design and Metalsmithing program. It seems like you've always had a desire to educate. You've instructed workshops and served as president for jewelry clubs throughout your higher education ventures. Did you always have the intention of becoming an educator?

Leslie Boyd: It’s funny that you said that I always wanted to be an educator because it’s so not the case at all. I didn’t realize that until early on in college, but if you would have asked senior year of high school Leslie, teaching was not on my radar. When I was in my undergrad at Pratt Institute, I started working as a jewelry studio monitor and loved it! I loved sharing information with my peers and being able to contribute to the studio and its community.

It was within the first few weeks of having that position, which was part of my work-study position as a student, when I definitely knew that I wanted to go into education. In terms of what I want to accomplish as an educator or why I feel so impassioned to be an educator, and I think most professors might say the same thing, but it comes down to the people who had a great influence on you. When I was in high school, even though I definitely wouldn’t have acknowledged that I wanted to teach, I had this amazing mentor, my high school art teacher. He kept me grounded and made me want to keep going to school because I wasn’t doing too well otherwise, and I wasn’t pushing myself towards anything. I had gone to summer school a few times, I was not motivated at all. He had a huge influence on me. I’ve stayed in touch with him until this day.

It sound like as an educator now, you’re giving back in that same vein. Trying to be not just an instructor, but rather to try and make an impact through mentorship.

Yeah, absolutely! I think it’s a real luxury as an arts professor, that we get to have such intimate relationships with our students. Intimate sounds like a creepy word in that context (Laughs), but just have really close relationships with our students. I have friends who might teach English or something like this and they’re in a massive lecture hall or even with an art history class, you don’t have the ability to have such a one on one connection with individuals. Having known how important that was to me, really getting my shit together and turning my life around, it’s totally selfish, but I crave being able to have that type of influence on other people and empower them. If I was going to
name one thing that describes why I’m so committed to being an educator, and why I know that this is what I’ll do for the rest of my life, it’s the ability to empower students.

**Having gone to two prestigious design schools, Pratt Institute for your BFA and Rhode Island School of Design for your MFA, did you face any scrutiny because you were pursuing an education in jewelry and metalsmithing?**

Not so much. Both those schools have really old and well-established jewelry programs. There’s not many schools that have that anymore within the U.S. It was actually a pretty common program at art schools and public universities post World War II, when a lot of soldiers were going back to school using the GI Bill. There was a craft school revolution to some degree because it was a trade. Craft programs tend to be more expensive to run, so a lot of schools shed these programs over the years. A lot of schools that initially had textiles programs, for instance, no longer have them. But jewelry and ceramics are the holdouts of that. There was a really strong jewelry program at both Pratt and RISD. When I was applying for graduate school, I decided on which schools to go to by looking up which schools had the best jewelry MFA programs and applied to the top five—this isn’t something I would advise to my students who are looking to pursue an MFA. I was really interested in Cranbrook Academy of Art. Iris Eichenberg is an artist who I’d really admired for a long time through my undergrad and she was the head of the jewelry program at Cranbrook.

I thought I would definitely go to Cranbrook if I got in, and I did, but it’s more of a residency style program. So you eat, sleep and breathe with your classmates. It’s outside of Detroit and pretty remote. I didn’t have a car.
then because I had been living in New York City for years. Most people live on campus and they were mostly shared dorms. It was just not something that I could do at that point in my life. But the other big thing was that there weren’t any teaching opportunities at Cranbrook because it’s a graduate-only institution. So I knew that it would be more difficult for me leaving Cranbrook to get a teaching position, even as an adjunct, because I would have no experience. However, RISD offered me a position to come study there during my first semester and be able to teach a class as an instructor of record—not as a teaching assistant, but as an instructor of the course. I was able to teach for five semesters, which helped me to pay for school. I came away from RISD with an immense amount of teaching under my belt, which really helped me to get employment after graduate school.

**So your decision was strategic, as you continued to develop your craft, while also preparing yourself as a future educator?**

The teaching was really the key for why I ended up going to RISD. Pratt by the way, was totally a fluke. My sister went to Pratt. When I was in high school, I was not doing really well at all and did not intend to apply to college. My mother said, “You have to apply to school!” I was like, “I’m going to go to the Aveda Institute. I’m going to become a hairdresser.” This was my 18-year-old punk kid-self, having no desire to go into an academic system or to continue with the rigidity of academia. But my mom would say, “You have to apply to at least one school. You have to do this, you’ll regret it if you don’t.”

I’d visited my sister at Pratt all the time and Pratt was this magical place and it was in Brooklyn and it was this beautiful campus, which was weird for major cities to have these old campuses like Pratt. I actually went up the last day that I could apply for school and did a portfolio review in person and applied. It was the only school that I applied to and thankfully I got in. It changed the entire trajectory of my life, but me going to Pratt was such a fluke. It was like a combination of threats and admiration for my sister (*laughs*).

One thing that was pretty interesting at RISD, is that most of the graduate programs share this one building where they have studios. So if you’re studying painting, sculpture, printmaking, glass, any of these kinds of various media, you’re in this one building that’s in downtown Providence and you have your own studio. Jewelry and furniture making weren’t in that studio building. We were in the jewelry studio or in the furniture studio and that was something that I actually did not like about my experience there because I felt like we were kept separate from the ‘artists,’ if you will.

I sought out taking classes in other parts of the institution. And then ultimately my last semester at RISD, I pushed my way into having a studio in the main graduate-studio building. I went to the director of the MFA studio building and told them, “I am working on a larger scale. I am doing more installation-based work. I can’t do this at a jeweler’s bench within the jewelry studio.” So I was able to get a studio space in the other building. I didn’t feel like I was looked down upon by anyone or that the jewelry program was necessarily ‘othered’ by the student...
body, but structurally it was actually kept really separate, which was strange to me. I'm not sure if that's something specific to RISD.

*Your jewelry is unorthodox to say the least. Vanity is not the priority with your work, instead your jewelry focuses on social commentary, addressing stereotypes and social issues. What led to these concepts and how does jewelry supplement those ideas?*

I grew up in the punk scene in Philadelphia and activism was a large component of my life. I was really fortunate to have an extremely progressive mother who was outspoken about social justice causes. Activism was never something I had to fight with my home life to be a part of.

I never thought I would study jewelry, it wasn’t on my radar until I took a class as an elective and just fell in love with the process. I realized the thing that was really beautiful about it, was that I could combine this love for the process of working with metal and of citing work on the body with more of my personal life and how I was interested in having a voice for social justice or activist causes. I was creating work that, much like fashion, is being openly presented to people outside of the gallery space. It’s to be worn, it’s to be experienced.

Jewelry provides an extended voice for individuals, as does clothing. Depending on what you decide to put on when you go out into the world, you’re making a statement without having any conversations. I’ve used humor as a strategy to spark conversations or have opportunities to then have a heavier discourse about causes that I’m really interested in. I mean, the same way I feel like someone would boldly wear a Crucifix or a Star of David or something that defines their faith as being an aspect of how they’ve moved through their life, jewelry gives me an outlet to define what I really care and am passionate about.

There’s probably also a lot that ties back to growing up in the punk scene, where buttons, pins, badges and patches were such a heavy component of that. I was accessorizing my activism at that point in a different way. I guess it’s a pretty natural progression to some degree.

*Your series “F-Words” is a critique on American gender stereotypes. The piece “Say My Name” definitely stands out and seems to work in two ways. One, it alludes to the Freudian idea of penis envy. Second, the gold-plated and erect state of the phallus is a signifier of male hubris. Both coalesce into a transference of power to whomever adorns it. I certainly appreciate the humor behind it, but it is a pretty profound statement for a jewelry piece.*

Thanks! That was totally my intention because it’s a piece that no one can help but laugh at when they see it. It’s a replica of the ‘8 inch All-American Whopper Dong,’ by the way. So it was modeled off of this realistic dildo and it’s 8 inches in scale and hangs at crotch length. Anyone who sees this piece hanging in a gallery, being worn or in a photograph of it, is immediately laughing. It’s so over the top. But if people challenge themselves to think about it a little bit, either in the act of wearing it or viewing it, they may think, “What is this about?”

Even though I was raised by a single mother, I was part of a macho circle
that exists within the punk scene. My dad is a big-bow hunter and a hyper-masculine individual. Also just growing up in an Italian-American community. So there’s these three groups from my childhood where there is this total ownership of masculinity and wearing it and presenting it in this really proud way and a lot of times, a gold chain went along with it. With this piece I’ve really scaled up the chain, so going from what might be traditionally like a 3 millimeter wide figaro chain, which is that curb style chain used in the work, to I believe it ended up being a 1/2 inch wide. When considering the pendant, it has the phallus on the end as way to joke about the absurdity of it ultimately. It was so unlike a symbol that one might wear on a gold chain, but was rather bluntly the exact symbol that individuals associate with being hypermasculine.

It’s totally absurd! And if people go away not thinking deeply at all about these themes that I’m more interested in having conversations about, then it’s fine. Even if they just laugh I’m totally OK with that because I think people like enjoying and interacting with jewelry and accessories, and seeing them presented in a space that’s outside of the gift shop where they may be required to consider its meaning beyond adornment is really important. So even if just humor is all that they come away with initially, perhaps they’ll think back on it later.

I understand your series “Monuments and Valleys” is an ongoing project. What’s the idea behind this series of works?
At some point in graduate school, I became obsessed with monuments, specifically the Washington Monument as this phallic symbol of power and authority. I was using that imagery in some of the work that I was creating at that time and people started associating me as being really into the Washington Monument (Laughs) or obelisks. My mom actually was in Washington, D.C. for a rally and bought a Washington Monument pencil sharpener and sent it to me thinking that I would like it, which I did. So I was just thinking in the studio, and this was about three years ago when I started working on this body of work, just staring at this Washington Monument standing there at the edge of my desk, it’s 4 inches high or something, as this symbol of authority and power and the seat of our nation--but also absolutely a phallus. I started thinking about other symbols of America, such as “America the Beautiful” and this idea of “purple mountains majesty” and “waves of green,” etc. This idea of the valley or our beautiful country as being described as the more feminine aspect of our nation or our national identity and the monument as being the hypermasculine or macho aspect of that. That’s how the “Monuments and Valleys” name and theme initially came along.

It’s this dichotomy between the natural environment and the man-made monumental environment in the U.S. At first it was more about gender, the stand-in for the phallus being the obelisk and the sensuality of the natural earth through the valleys as feminine if you will. But it’s gone on more to be more of a commentary on U.S. politics.

With my more recent work in this series, it’s more about money and power dynamics. Very much set in
post-2016-election, with the state of U.S. politics at this time and perhaps absurd gestures that have been made around Washington and our politicians. So an example of that would be this piece called “Fuck, My Eye!,” which is an obelisk crashing into a moon. That was a direct response to a moment in time, during the 2016 election cycle, when everyone said they were fleeing to Canada because they couldn’t stand the state of politics here and also comments from Elon Musk about the prioritization of colonizing Mars. It’s just so fucking absurd to me! I understand if people are genuinely and critically threatened by this state of politics, whether it’s local, national, etc., that they need to displace themselves as an act of surviving and living. That’s one thing, but not wanting to put up with what’s happening within our nation politically because it doesn’t align with your beliefs and instead of trying to make active strides towards changing what you don’t like about our political situation, fleeing, is just such an absurd thing to me. The “Fuck, My Eye!” piece is about just how hilarious that whole concept really is. The seemingly disposable nature of our nation once it’s spoiled.

Then there’s “Reflecting Poorly,” which is heavily influenced by my consumption of contemporary American culture through my Twitter and Facebook newsfeed. So with “Reflecting Poorly,” I read this article about the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool on the National Mall, where one day in 2017, 80 ducks and ducklings died due to a parasite caused by the snails that were in the reflecting pool. They ultimately had to drain millions of gallons of water from the reflecting pool, kill all the snails, scrub the pool, refill it with water and replace the ducklings because this plague had occurred. I took it as such—as being this ‘plague’ that befell Washington post-inauguration. That piece was also made by playing around
Fuck, My Eye!
Monuments and Valleys
2018
with some objects I had on my desk that I’d been collecting related to this theme of the state of U.S. politics. I used a piece of antique coral that looks like a Cheeto, a piece of jasper that had a strange similarity in its patterning to Realtree camouflage and that Washington Monument pencil sharpener I mentioned earlier. I put them together into a pendant ultimately called “Reflecting Poorly”—a play off of that moment in time.

You were part of a group showing entitled “Body of Work: Contemporary Art Jewelry on the Body.” I read through the abstract and it mentioned how jewelry evokes a nonverbal engagement with an audience. They also quoted American dancer and choreographer Martha Graham, where she had once said, “The body says what words cannot.” Do you think jewelry can still be functional without the body?

Yes, but it also depends on what someone’s definition of functional is. Like brooches are really ambiguous if shown off of the body because without seeing the fastening or how it’s put onto the body, you might think this is a small object, this is a small sculpture. Is this a photograph of a painting, what might this photograph or object be? Whereas things like a necklace, have a neck form or reference a neck. So they’re directly referencing the body, same as a ring and a bracelet. There’s this reference to the body without the body existing. Jewelry is activated by the body. I think sculpture is activated by the body too. You can admire a sculpture in a photograph, but you can never quite experience it in the same way as being within a three-dimensional space with it. Those are things I have conversations with my students a lot about and how we’re documenting our jewelry. I definitely don’t think that I’ve figured this out or that there is a right answer, it’s all about context and intent.
Have you explored making jewelry for body modifications?
I’ve been asked that a lot just because I have a few piercings and stretched ears, but no. My focus has become so much more based on social commentary. I think the last work that I made that really wasn’t super concept heavy would probably be the “Frozen Rope” series, and even that was poking at the door a little bit. But the formats that I choose usually just go hand in hand with perhaps a statement that I’m trying to make, so I haven’t discovered a statement that I’m trying to make that would not be tokenized by becoming a plug. Because then it’s about body modification, instead of just being about the statement of something being worn.

You're a member of the JV Collective, based in Philadelphia, along with seven other female jewelry artists. How important is it to find a community of artists who share the same convictions?
I think it’s so important! There’s a lot of things that I really love about jewelry, but I feel really fortunate in that I found this great community around it, of other artists, many of whom I initially might have met through school. Our community is so small in comparison to photographers or painters or sculptors, etc. It’s a very small, tight-knit community and that allows for more intimate collaboration and dialogue.

The JV Collective started in Philadelphia initially with myself and a good friend of mine, Emily Cobb. We went into this old public school building in Philadelphia that unfortunately had shuttered with some massive school closings in 2013. We were one of the first tenants in the building. There was a mixed-use project that was moving into the space, where it would be rented out to community artists, nonprofit organizations, businesses, etc. So we got a studio space in there and after just a few months, we were networking with the rest of the jewelry community in Philadelphia to see if anyone wanted to move into a larger collaborative space together. We moved in with three other artists, Mallory Weston, Maria Eife and Melanie Bilenker. It was just the five of us that moved into this space together and we ultimately became JV Collective because we needed a name for the sign (Laughs) and for the listing in the building so that people could get in contact with us. We’ve evolved into a team that collaborates on works, writings, exhibitions, etc.

One of the reasons why I so strongly identify as a jeweler is because it’s been so easy for me to find community within the jewelry field. And that’s really encouraging. It makes you want to continue working and making and doing what you’re doing, when you have other people around you who are interested and excited about those things that you can ask honest and sometimes difficult questions to.

You have recently started the Making Progress initiative, which is an online database resource for artists interested in social justice topics. How did this idea come about?
As I’ve gotten further into my career as an educator, I feel so strongly that teaching students how to be or assisting them to become more inquisitive and to challenge the world and structures that have been forced upon them, is really important so that they can grow as individuals and artists. But you also have to
acknowledge and be sensitive to different viewpoints. I discovered that there was a difficult space when it came to addressing social justice topics within the classroom and being sensitive to being in a classroom setting and to not necessarily take sides or aligning yourself with one point of view, but instead creating a space for really meaningful dialogue.

As an activist and having grown up being active within local politics and social justice movements, I was really struggling doing that in my classroom. I was like, “Fuck, where are the resources?” How can I learn to bring up these conversations that are really important to how we move through the world, with my students in a way that is going to be respectful and robust and challenge everyone’s ideas. I just started doing this research for myself thinking, well, what are different artists doing who might be addressing topics from environmentalism to gun violence, immigration, etc.? I can use this artwork or the review of this artwork or this artist statement, as a point of departure to have these conversations. As I was gathering that information, I really wanted to share it because this is going to be really helpful for me to have these conversations in my classroom, but in order for us to have a more conscious, active and participatory people, we need to have these conversations in every classroom.

I had this individual, Rebecca Schena, who is currently an undergraduate student at RISD, she emailed me about a year ago and really wanted to do an internship with me. At first, I was initially going to say, “No, sorry, I don’t take on interns.” It’s just not something that I’m suited for and prepared to do. But I went and I looked at her website and again, she’s an undergraduate student and she was making work and she wrote a badass letter to me that was about her interest in my work and about the work that she was creating. She was also working with themes of social justice and activism, specifically gun violence was a large theme. So I looked at her website and decided I’ll just have a conversation with this person and let them know about this idea that I had brewing about bringing together some sort of project of gathering these resources that are related to social justice and craft. I set up a Skype conversation with her and she was really enthusiastic about being a part of the project, so we decided to tackle it together.

Making Progress, an online database, as it currently exists is very much a work in progress. The idea is that we will continuously add to it. Rebecca came to my studio space in Philadelphia for an internship last summer, and we asked, what does this project look like? At first it was maybe going to be just a curated exhibition of these works, with an accompanying catalog of different essays, but also perhaps project prompts from different artists and educators on how they might address these topics in their classroom. But it morphed from being this exhibition and catalog based format, to being this larger database format with the ability to have exhibitions and catalogs come from that, but as a living, breathing, growing project.

I can appreciate the effort in establishing a resource to help foster discourse regarding social issues and divisive topics. At the bottom of the Making Progress homepage,
there’s a note stating how craft is an appropriate form for such dialogue to take place because of its communal aspect. Can you tell me more about that?

Rebecca and I were discussing what information do we need to put on this website? What kind of content do we need outside of just the information, the database of artists, lectures, exhibitions, writing, etc.? What do we need to ask people or present to people about the project? Why are we doing craft became a big question that we were aware people would probably ask.

First and foremost, it’s our field. It’s our place where we’re comfortable. Handcraft exists absolutely within the fine arts community—I’ll argue about this any day—but it’s also a means of mending a shirt. It’s a means of creating the dishes that you’re going to be eating off of, fixing a pot, shoeing a horse. It’s utilitarian and it’s communal and because of that, there’s a sense that craft is for the people. It can be as conceptual as you want it to be, it can be as critical as you want it to be, but it can also be functional. It can be a means of how you can live your life, and how you can provide for yourself and your family and your community.

We thought that was a really interesting aspect of why both Rebecca and I are really drawn to craft as a medium and why we identify as craft artists instead of just specifically an artist or a visual artist. That’s how we defined the database, but we also include visual artists who may have, for a particular project, used a craft-based medium. We wanted to have the most robust database that we could have for the students and educators who access it. It seemed to serve the project better, to be less confined or concise with the boundaries of it. Ultimately, our initial mission was to provide the resources and

Leslie with her piece “Practice Dissent” from the “Monuments and Valleys” series.
opportunities for individuals to direct their own activism.

I worked on that this past summer and then I had to finish renovating a house, then move across the country and start a new job. So it hasn’t gotten a lot of love in the last six months or so. I consider that Rebecca and I facilitated this project and put it together, but I don’t think we own it by any means. We have a submission form on the website so people can add different information to the database, and when people create projects as a response to the information they gathered, we can also add it directly to the database. If this inspired someone to develop a course, project or an exhibition, we want to help facilitate that, but not take ownership of it. I hope it can grow and become a helpful resource in the coming years.

You’re currently exhibiting some work right now, but what are your goals for the new year?

I’ve been carving plastics for a few years now. Mostly Corian, which is a countertop material—a high density plastic. It carves beautifully. You get a finish like stone almost on it. This past year I did my first jump into carving stone, so I’ve been really fascinated by that lately. I went to a gem show in Denver, which was my first time and it absolutely blew my mind. I definitely want to play around with gem and stone cutting from a technical perspective. I don’t know what’s going to happen with that, but it’s something that I want to practice and develop more. It’s such a robust craft in this part of the country that wasn’t really present in Philadelphia or in the East Coast. So I want to take advantage of that geographically.

I have some other pieces on my bench that I’m working on that are continuing with the “Monuments and Valleys” series and playing around with memes and Twitter feeds. How we as a nation digest politics, so not necessarily the issues themselves, but how we respond and digest them. I also have this third thing that has been on the back burner for a while that I keep thinking about.

My grandmother passed away a few years ago and when we were going through all of her belongings to clean up her house so that we could sell it, I came across an insurance document. It was sent to an insurance company when there was a robbery at her house. It’s typewritten and lists the jewelry that was stolen from her home. I immediately knew I had to have this! I’ve been thinking how wonderful this document of stolen items from the 70s is and how it would be fun to recreate some of the items based on the vague descriptions.

So like, “two gold charm bracelets, $500 chain, 15 charms, $2,000, one large gold medallion,” and “10 charms not mounted on heavy gold chain.” This list is so amazing because who knows what everything looks like! This is so nondescript, it just has a monetary value, material and the format listed. So I’ve been thinking about this for awhile and want to do some sort of archival project with it, where I go through photographs of my grandmother and see if I can identify any of these pieces based on the descriptions. She took a lot of photos, so there’s a lot to go through. If I can’t find photographs of some pieces, perhaps I can recreate them based on the minimal descriptions.
It would be really interesting to investigate and rediscover them, whether you actually find them within the photographs, or synthesize them based off of your grandmother’s taste. I think it’d be fun. I’m interested in how jewelry can so easily be a platform for social commentary, but another thing that I’m obsessed with is if someone is fleeing a space, it might be the only thing that they bring with them because it’s on their body or it can fit in their pockets. It might be the only thing that’s passed down from your parents. If your parents pass away, maybe all that you would have are their wedding bands. So there’s this heirloom quality to jewelry that’s so significant. You don’t even have to talk about the specificity of the jewelry itself, and I think it may be a different experience for a son versus a daughter, but there’s this legacy of an heirloom being passed down. I think most people can identify with that to some degree.

Textiles break down, furniture is big and clumsy to move, clothing gets worn out, but metal is long-lasting. You could easily have something that’s from your great-grandparents that’s a piece of metal. That’s another thing that I really love about the jewelry field. So I think this project idea takes advantage of that sentimentality and the heirloom and the archive, as a point of departure for exploration.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

leslieboyd.com
craftandactivism.com
@lesliedylanboyd

Leslie showing her collection of Corian to experiment with.
This is what drowning feels like.
Midnight.

She bursts through the tattered wooden screen door. The springs screech in my ears as the door closes. Her curls once permed, full and buoyant, are now sweat-soaked and messy, skirt wrinkled like a Raggedy Ann doll, and her legs spread for another man. He’s obese and unkept, hair resembling coffee grounds. He’s unshaven, patched, pores exuding the smell of malt liquor, bile, salty and sweet (most likely residual of vomit) mildew, and smoked bacon – a smell I can only categorize in our visits to The Mission – the local shelter we’ve volunteered at from time to time–homeless. Footsteps, whole and heavy, clack across, the cherry wood floors, creaking – my door ajar just enough to see her flap into the walls like a dry-landed fish and open more than enough to let in the stench.

As they slam their bodies into the walls past my bedroom, I see his belly, hanging over blue jeans, royal blue, his brown leather belt to snap loose at any second.

I’m reminded of my first time in the adult video bookstore on Broadway, how the seclusion of a fire-engine-red curtain in the back corner caught my seven year old eye (its intention to caution visitors under the age of 18 to turn around). Lining the aisles, primary colored boxes sat decorated by naked and mouth-gaping women who appeared both frightened and excited, almost as excited as all the men seemed to be, gawking over the skirt that nearly had her underwear peeking out each time she bent down to grab another boxed video cassette off the shelf in front of me. This wasn’t like Blockbuster, there wasn’t a copy of The Princess Bride or The Wizard of Oz, just a bunch of those weird women decorating the front of paper sleeves.

I have etched many a mental image of her men, categorizing their hungered eyes and give-a-shit-less attitudes with the best of Kitty’s most prized regulars—the kind of men who got a hard on whether they propositioned the women they paid for or spent their money elsewhere buying “virgins’” soiled underwear. When I was eight, we went to Kitty’s. I saw a full-breasted woman crouched,
When I was eight, we went to Kitty’s. I saw a full breasted woman crunched, wearing cat ears, plum-red lips adjacent to a marquee sign entitled ‘A Pop Show’.
I hold my breath, clenched tight in my chest, grasping to the last few pockets of air as if I'm twenty feet deep below the surface of a wave, tasting metal in my mouth as my lungs collapse.
wearing cat ears, plum red lips adjacent to a marquee sign entitled A Peep Show. Dilapidated letters clung to its off-white background, lights, strobes, ricocheted off the reflection of Broadway’s recently laid asphalt, wet from a late-night shower. Kitty’s stench of cigarettes and passion fruit lubricants left me itching for a shower. Anything to rinse the residue of collagen pumped pussycats pushing their breasts into men that too could have been homeless.

The men she keeps bring through our front door, the man passing by my bedroom is no different. Yet, she basks in their misguided adorations for her ability to make it through tough times, times they know nothing about, times they won’t linger long enough to learn.

They don’t know what it smells like to clean up last night’s dinner off the walls when it’s decayed, composted in her organs. They don’t know what it feels like to hear, “You’re worthless.” They don’t know what it’s like, what it takes to brace my legs between the claw foot bath tub and the eggshell-white cabinetry, all 90 pounds of me, to hook my arms beneath her body that is limp and soiled, hoping she doesn’t choke on the vomit that drools down my forearm.

I hold my breath, clenched tight in my chest grasping to the last few pockets of air as if I’m twenty feet deep below the surface of a wave, tasting metal in my mouth as my lungs collapse. Swallow the shit men, swallow the shit life she schleps through our front door. Swallow until you can’t anymore.

This is what drowning feels like.

Pale pink sheets wrap their arms around me as if to coddle the exhalation of screams, screams I’ve swallowed these past ten seconds, these past nine years. Kissing my hand and holding it to my cheek, my eyes clench shut, and I imagine I’m anywhere but here. And still, with a weighted collapse, their sand bag bodies hit the mattress upstairs and through the paper-thin walls. I drown in moans that should have escaped my adolescence.
Morning.

When the sun peeks out, a shy push of the wind could disturb what appear to be clever details in our house. Collection-worthy nods to class: classic novels, classic movies, classic confined alignments with Sunset and Home and Garden magazines. Little do they know she is class-less. She barrels through the house, over and over, threading together the story, our story, that never made it to the cover of those magazines.

My eyes peel open, fresh sliced onions sting, and tears, sweet and salty begin to propel down my face. If only she could see me cry. Recoiling underneath my sheets I remove the heat pinched needles threading through my chest, to pretend the onions roasting in the kitchen are being cooked for a breakfast I’ve seen in the pages of those magazines. A table neat, decorated by hand knit doilies, tangerines juice fresh squeezed, sandcastle colored crepes rolled to hold in the sweet chocolate and strawberry surprise each settled on top of China detailed in floral intricacies, daisies and sunflowers. The smell of sugar and vanilla extract filling the room. If only.
My eyes peel open, fresh sliced onions sting and tears, sweet and salty, begin to propel down my face. If only she could see me cry.
Yet tears often propel themselves forward in the moments I've spent hiding beneath the pink sheets. Moments that I mask mistakenly underneath new memories.
Drowning.

Laboratory experiments have shown eighty-seven seconds is the longest period of time a person can hold their breath without forcing an involuntary reaction. At this point, water enters the lungs and forces into the windpipe where, if the larynx holds, the water causes a sort of suffocation. In other cases, water hemorrhages the lungs filling them with blood, and both the heart and the lungs inevitably end here—failure.

The closest I found to an explanation says the word drowning arises from several etiologies but nowhere did they mention mothers. They didn’t mention her decisions leave scars deeper than skin, they didn’t mention draining, piercing, pumping, poison, punching; they didn’t mention—what it feels like to be swallowing shit-for-breakfast or to smell bacon-coated-blankets.

Yet tears often propel themselves forward in the moments I spent hiding beneath the pink sheets, moments that I mask mistakenly underneath new memories.

I’d hoped to lose my memories when my heart went into failure. I longed for the comfort of an Afghan woven neatly into delicate floral patterns to wrap around me. I longed to live in the life I saw on the cover of Sunshine and Home and Garden magazines. I longed for the comfort of being safe, transplanted from our story, from its beginning, to the stories written within those pages. I longed most, for the kiss I laid into the palm of my hand to move beyond its imaginary impact on my cheek. But I found myself suppressed deep below the surface of a wave swollen and numb. Even now.

To this day
i imagine
i am—
anywhere but my adolescence.

***
Humor.

I pry my eyes open, several years have passed. A relocation to a new city, therapy and therapy, high school, college, new friends, new family, detachment, and a new phone number, a new email, a new life.

I catch a glimpse of a smooth, white ass and some sun-soaked beige sheets—one way to recognize I don’t exactly remember coming back here last night. But with a quick thud, he rolls over allowing the weight of his hairy legs to wrap around my naked body and for whatever reason, I don’t slide out and begin putting that jade velvet jumper back on and catch a Lyft home —my anxiety levels are low this a.m. His bed is comfortable, sunken-in and coated by some higher-thread-count sheets we didn’t make it underneath last night, too caught up in the rush of his breath’s burst of hot air past my ears and the sweat beading down our bodies. He even cracked a window so he could still lie next to me. My head is pounding, nausea keeps welling up inside of me as he rolls his head back and allows some nasal blockages to push out those gargling sounds.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror, admiring what I like to think is a nice ass wondering if he sees my face the same way I do—outright ugly without meticulously placed lashes, matte finished powder, and copious amounts of liquid eyeliner—I’ve never been good at seeing myself in a confident manner, much less post slamming shots and fucking. And how could anyone love that?

“Good morning beautiful,” he humors. Resting that familiar hot breath into the nook I keep above my collar bone, but instead of responding I swallow. The smell of pepper and patchouli still clings to my skin. I run through the list my girlfriends have rambled on about: how the men I’ve been involved with aren’t the right ones, how if I’d abstained from sex these men would (might) still be interested, how I’m perfect but I haven’t found the right one just yet, love will happen when I least expect it... here comes nausea again.

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I catch a glimpse of a smooth, white ass and some sun-soaked beige sheets—one way to recognize I don’t exactly remember coming back here last night.
Even as a little girl I knew I needed to stay above the surface to survive, but where my body floated, the little girl inside of me sifted deeper and deeper into darkness.
Love.

Love won’t find me, that’s what no one understands. I drowned, sometime ago, I buried love in days that made new skin. And, waves kept coming, they keep coming, forget me in the place where my heart was supposed to recover from its beatings. Half-conscious and enfeebled by oxygen depletion, by the depletion that leaves a little girl, a woman in no position to fight her way back up to the surface. Even as a little girl I knew I needed to stay above the surface to survive, but where my body floated the little girl inside of me sifted deeper and deeper into darkness.

This is what drowning feels like.

Statement from the Author

I have grown up recalling imperfections from my childhood, you may have found yourself in a place, at an older age, doing the same, harboring feelings that you weren’t permitted to process, because life must go on. Masks grow more impenetrable, buried beneath new memories and time, yet you still haven’t grieved or loosened your fingers from this place embedded deep within you. Then you meet someone, maybe it’s a guy, maybe it’s a girl, a friend, coworker, stranger, lover, someone who wants to love you. You spend hours over-analyzing your behavior, your appearance, the way you speak, your knowledge about a certain subject, your ability to make small talk, and each time the mask gets thicker and they see less of you. I’ve been writing to get back to me. The inspiration in this piece lends an opportunity and a permission to process those childhood imperfections. The hope is that the more I share, the more that mask might resemble the vulnerable pieces of myself I’ve been tucking away for sometime now. So if you’re reading this, I’m in route to recovery. And, thank you.
What drives an artist to create? For MSU Denver alumna and emerging author Kali Fajardo-Anstine, it’s her cultural lineage. With the diverging growth that Denver is currently experiencing, Kali’s mission with her writing is to preserve and illuminate the indigenous, Chicano and ethnic roots that run deep within Denver and greater Colorado. Even after dropping out of high school, she persevered, never losing sight of her literary ambitions. Kali doesn’t fear rejection and will hurdle any obstacles that disrupt her path to success. My interview with Kali was the most anticipated since my start as editor-in-chief of Metrosphere. I had the privilege of speaking with Kali on Dec. 7, 2018 at Union Station, where we talked about history, resilience and how profound affirmation is for students of color.
Estevan Ruiz: Your family has deep indigenous and Chicano roots here in Colorado. With the exponential growth of Denver and the rise of gentrification affecting historically marginalized communities, how has this aspect impacted your work?

Kali Fajardo-Anstine: It was something that I was not consciously aware of in the beginning when I first started writing as a teenager. I think the growth in Denver really hit hard about seven or eight years ago. When I was a teenager there was an awareness, LoDo was being redone, Five Points was starting to be gentrified. But it hadn’t gotten to the point where people in my family lost homes because of property taxes, where they did reverse mortgages on their homes in the West Side and when they died, the bank took it. So it hadn’t gotten to the point yet where we had these major losses that I was able to articulate, but as time went on, I really started incorporating it more and more into my work.

I did my undergrad at Metro State, then I went for a year to San Diego State University for a program, then I went to the University of Wyoming and I got my masters, then I was in South Carolina, then Key West, and then Durango, Colorado. I was gone for a huge chunk of time and I’d come back and visit. Each visit, it was worse and worse. Just completely unrecognizable. Now I live downtown in the heart of all of this, and I don’t feel like I’m living in Denver anymore; I feel like I’m living in an alternate reality (laughs).

This isn’t the city that I grew up in. It’s really impacted my work because I want to make sure that the original soul of the city, that’s obviously always changing, is maintained and documented in a way that shows there was and is a culture here and there’s a rich history, a very complex multi-cultural history, and I hope that the newcomers are willing to learn about it.

I noticed this recognition and implementation in your writing. In “All Her Names,” you set up the opening scene with the main character, Alicia, living in a contemporary concrete house within a gentrified neighborhood.

I’m glad you caught that. She’s the gentrification Latina chick. I mean those boxy-houses with the glass and the concrete, they really hurt my soul to look at because the original integrity of a neighborhood is closely tied to place. So when you come into a place and you don’t know the history and you tear down the original structures, you’re tearing down all the memories and the emotions that were associated with the original neighborhood. I think Alicia is an interesting character.
because she has to straddle both worlds, and at the end of the story she is literally straddling her ex-boyfriend. (Laughs) I love her, but I would judge her, and I hope the reader gets that feeling too.

How significant is place in a story?
When I was at the University of Wyoming, I knew my voice is very unique and I knew that I had a certain level of talent, but that doesn’t get you very far. There’s a lot of talented people out there, but you have to identify what about your work that’s distinctive. I realized what’s distinctive about my voice and what I have to say is that, my ancestors had been in this place for thousands of years! You cannot remove place from my identity because I have no identity without my land. My work is completely 100 percent out of place, out of my land base. My work is 100 percent focused on my place, to remove it would be to gut the work.

Your mother, Renee Fajardo, is a longtime community activist within Denver, who was inducted into the Cesar Chavez Leadership Hall of Fame this year (2018). You’ve stated before that your relationship with your mother was a complicated one. The complications stemmed from your teenage years, where you struggled to come to grips with your identity and carried shame for being apart of a minority group, and your mother’s cultural practices reinforcing that. Now that you’re an adult and into your writing career, how has your perspective changed with regards to your identity and relationship with your mother?
I think that’s a very specific Colorado Chicano question (Laughs). The shame is multigenerational. When I was growing up, I had no clue what my ethnicity was supposed to be. You’d get those forms for class, I still get them when I apply for jobs, and it says “list your ethnicity.” So my great-grandfather is from the Philippines, my mother’s mother is Jewish and my biological father, who hasn’t been in the picture since I was 13, is a white guy from Detroit. I was raised heavily with this Chicano culture, but they never used that word. The word they would use was Spanish, which is bizarre because we’re not from Spain, no one was from Spain. They were just indigenous people who were colonized by Spanish people and then they were colonized by the United States, so it creates this sort of identity schizophrenia.

As a child, many white people would come up and ask me, “What are you because you look so different,” or, “You have exotic features.” It took me a long time to realize that that was a way to diminish me. It was a way to set me apart and force me to talk about things that I didn’t necessarily always need to talk about. As time went on, I started refusing to answer that question. But after some years of reflection, I would say, “Well, you want to know who I am? It’s very complicated. Do you have time to listen?” And I’d give a long response and the asker would say, “Oh, I didn’t expect that.” And then of course they would follow up with, “I knew you had some Native in you!” (Laughs) I’ve been able to let go of a lot of my resentment about it. In terms of my identity with my family, it took me a long time to get away from them in order to see how unique and special they truly are.

A lot of the issues I had with my mother stemmed from the relationship she
had with my biological father. He was very physically abusive. Growing up, a lot of my childhood was marked by a lot of fear and sadness because I was witnessing domestic violence on a regular basis. I blamed my mom a lot for that because I didn’t understand why we were in that situation. As I got older I realized, no, she’s a survivor, she was a victim. There was nothing that she could’ve done besides what she did, which was get out of it and better her entire community for doing that.

I was always embarrassed that she was so interested in storytelling, and she would come to my school and do presentations. When I started to do my own research and I started my own career as a writer, I realized that I am basically a mirror image of her, but I’m choosing the literary form instead of cultural activism and folk arts. Now I always say, “I love my mom!” I’m a lot like her in terms of even how I talk or my laugh. There’s just so much of me that is her.

As a person of color, how does one come to terms with the dichotomy of being original to one place, as you and your family are, yet being othered by a greater society?

That’s been the driving force behind a lot of my recent work. My novel that Random House is publishing in 2020 is a historical look at Denver’s ethnic enclaves. The reason I wanted to write that book is because that is a story I was born with. Those are the stories my aunties and my great-grandmother would always tell us.

In recent years, I’ve run into new Denver residents and they ask, “Are you actually from Denver?” I’m like, “Of course, I’m from Denver! What are you talking about?” It happens over and over again, and people will tell me, “Oh, you’re a minority now, being someone from the city.” It’s like, no, you don’t even get what kind of a minority I am! (Laughs) It’s so deep!

I’m from here, this is my land base, and nine times out of 10, the people I meet in town are not from Denver and have no knowledge about those of us who’ve been here for generations. It’s as if the place didn’t exist before they got here. In a lot of ways, I think it reflects the frontier mentality of, you’re coming over to a new civilization, nothing existed there before you. But that’s not the truth. There were civilizations all up and down here. We have been here for longer than many people can imagine.

Do you think that your writings are not only adding to a historical archive about certain minority groups, but also shedding new light on a largely
disregarded history?
Yeah! I was a Chicano studies minor and an English major at Metro State. I loved my Chicano studies classes because we talked about Hispanics, people who were here before statehood. They were the descendants of Spanish settlers, and we talked about how we didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us and that was really exciting. They were talking about the group of people that I come from and it felt like an acknowledgement. I felt seen.

A lot of the books that I saw pushed in mainstream media or by mainstream publishers had more of a coming-to-the-United-State-border-crossing narrative, which is very valuable and we need those stories, but there’s an entire group of Latinos who’ve been in the United States since before it was the United States or whose ancestors came over after or during the Mexican Revolution. So you have people who’ve been here for hundreds of years, 50 plus years, thousands of years, and they don’t identify as white. I want to make space for our stories in a larger, mainstream way. So when an Anglo meets someone who’s Latino, they don’t ask them, “Do you have papers or when did your family cross?” I want there to be an awareness that many of us were here before white Americans.

You’ve mentioned that you had an epiphany during your time at the University of Wyoming pursuing your MFA. You had this realization that you were living ‘in’ this perceived West as being a historically American white-space, and how disingenuous that is to whole groups of people who’ve been there long before. How are you trying to clarify this skewed notion in your writings?
I’ll get these Uber drivers and they’ll ask, “How long have you been in Denver? I’ve been here for three years or so.” And I’ll tell them, I’ve been here for about 3,000 years! (Laughs).

One of the things I’m trying to do now is be more empathetic and think about life from their [a transplant’s] perspective. I talked to this one woman from Ohio and she was saying that coming to Colorado represented freedom for her. Freedom to smoke weed because that helps control her anxiety, freedom to go outside and experience nature. I thought, wow, that’s probably what people felt with all of the different migrational waves that have come through Colorado. The West is still this idyllic place that represents great freedom, whether or not that’s true, that remains to be seen. But I am trying to understand them. I mean, if I’m going to accurately represent a place, I need to include characters from
always an early morning run.

Glee - Hub Folk. You wouldn't believe it, but I went out with him for 3 days. Not sure what he is doing these days. He writes in his letter and has to guess.

He is working on a farm near a orchard. How lovely Luz thought it was.
all walks of life and paint a true and accurate picture of them.

**As a woman and writer of color, what agency has writing given you?**

Writing has given me everything I have. It has given me my education, I have a GED, I dropped out of high school and went to Metro because that was only school that would take me. I really excelled there—probably in part because I was allowed to study writing and was allowed to study Chicano studies. From there I was able to get into graduate school, a fully funded program. I’ve gone to residencies that are very elite, like MacDowell and Yaddo. I’ve met people from the Ivies, and I’ve done readings in the East Coast. My writing has escorted me to a world that I would never have access to before. It’s taught me how to be a public speaker, how to carry myself and how to value myself and not allow people to diminish me in the ways that I allowed before I had such a strong sense of self.

**Have you experienced any discrepancies with regards to both your ethnicity and being a woman in the world of literature?**

I’m on an imprint of Random House called One World, spearheaded by Chris Jackson, which is dedicated to showcasing voices that challenge the status quo. I don’t know if I would have ended up on another kind of imprint. I’m very excited to be on One World because of the platform that they’re giving writers of color and marginalized voices. But the very existence of the imprint tells you something about the state of publishing.

I’ve run into strange comments in workshops because you’re primarily working with people who are not of your culture. So for example, one of my stories, “Remedies,” is based on my childhood growing up in Denver. I have a half brother I didn’t find out about until I was 13, and this is not that unusual in the community. I had a woman at my first workshop in San Diego and she said, “I would never take in my ex-husband’s baby from another woman! No woman would ever do this with your children!” At that point, I didn’t have such a strong sense of self and it made me feel like maybe I shouldn’t be able to write about the things that I’ve experienced because they’re so strange to certain kinds of people.

Early on for a writer of color, you can be pushed into exoticizing your work, othering yourself and your work. For example, my characters don’t speak Spanish. No one has spoken Spanish in my family for about two generations and I felt really pushed to add in a lot of Spanish early on because outsiders expected my characters to be fluent. After awhile, I pushed back. I mean, I could go on about this. This is something we’ve yet to see, the full extent of how I’ve experienced the literary world.

**That’s an interesting reflection to recognize how being a marginal member in a majority white profession can induce the exoticizing of oneself.**

It’s sort of like pandering to the white audience because allegedly, the white audience is the audience that buys books. The writer Arturo Islas never reached a popular audience. He died of complications due to AIDS in the early 90s and was the first Chicano to get a major publishing contract. When I first read his work, I had never recognized myself in any story before,
and that’s what I wanted. I wanted young Chicanos to be able to recognize themselves in my stories, but also just humans because the more distinctive you are, the more universal you are. If you pander to an audience, you’re taking away what makes you distinct. You’re altering the truth for them.

The One World imprint of Random House will be publishing your first book in April 2019, a collection of short stories entitled “Sabrina and Corina.” How did this opportunity with One World come about? My literary agent, Julia Masnik at Watkins Loomis Agency, has been with me since about 2013. I would work on short stories and send them to her throughout the years, and we developed our professional relationship this way. I finished the collection about three or four years ago, but by all accounts the publishing world doesn’t want story collections alone. I needed a novel. So, I worked my ass off with Julia, and I would send her drafts of my novel and she’d write back and tell me to start over after 120 pages (laughs). But really, she worked with me steadily over a span of years until my work was ready to show editors in New York City.

Eventually, an opportunity came up, through a former mentor of mine, that a small press wanted to see my work. The small press ended up rejecting it and when that happened, I had this aha moment and I told my agent, I think it’s time. We needed to go out and try to make a sale and she went straight to One World. I think probably because of her relationship with the imprint, but also because she knew it would be the best home for my work. My editor is Nicole Counts and to have a young black woman as an editor is very unusual in publishing. I feel nurtured and supported and valued by Nicole and the One World team. I’m happy that the first place said no to me so I could end up at One World. That happens
sometimes. Don’t marry your first lover, you know? (Laughs).

**How did higher education from both MSU Denver and the University of Wyoming set you up for the career you have now?**

I like to tell people that you don’t need an MFA to be a writer. You can be a writer anywhere in the world. All you need is pen and paper. Formal education created pathways to institutions that I wouldn’t normally have access to. When I was an undergrad, I didn’t know about getting into grad school. I didn’t even know there were creative writing programs until my junior year where one of my professors suggested that I apply. I was so ignorant that I didn’t even know I could pursue this as a higher degree. When you get an MFA, your professors have published books so they know a lot about how that world works and you can create mentorships. It creates an avenue for somebody who never came from connections to be able to start obtaining connections, and also craft.

I come from a long line of oral storytellers. My mother is a storyteller. I worked at West Side Books in the North Side since I was about 15, off and on, until about two years ago. I had been around readers and storytellers my whole life, but I’ve never had someone sit down and say we’re going to work on craft with you. I think it saved me a lot of years. The writer Rattawut Lapcharoensap, who I worked with at Wyoming, and the writer Joy Williams pushed me and took an interest in my work. If I didn’t have that interest in my work, I don’t know how long it would have taken to get to the level I’m at today. A good mentor can really propel you to the next level.

**Are you writing full time?**

I am, starting next week. I just put in my notice at my job at the League of Women Voters as an office manager. Before that, I taught at Fort Lewis College. I didn’t have enough time to write while I was there, so I made the decision not to renew my contract and to move back home to Denver. I saw a sign one day. I was walking and I saw an old suitcase tag that someone had scrawled Denver onto. I picked it up, thinking obviously this sign was only for me. I thought, “Look, this must mean something! I have to go back home.”

I think a lot of people were shocked that my most recent job is one you can do without a college degree, but it created space in my life. You need space and you need money coming in somehow to be an artist. I really enjoyed being an office manager while I had the job, but I got to finish that novel. Now I’m going to be all writer. They asked, “Do you have an opportunity lined up?” I said, “Yeah, it’s called finish the second book because I’m going to be in trouble if I don’t.” (Laughs).

**You make an effort to relate to others through your writings and teachings. How important is affirmation in academia, especially for minority groups?**

My little nephew was born premature. He’s one years old now and I was telling my sister, “Why won’t he walk? Every time I try to put him down to walk, he cries. He’s being a lazy baby!” My older sister comes over and says, “If you say he’s lazy, he’ll be lazy.” It took me back because I was told that I was stupid by teachers up until college. I had teachers telling me that I couldn’t do math and that I wasn’t a strong student. It just
spiraled out of control because when you hear those messages all the time, especially as a student of color, you’re like, well, I can’t get out of this hole that you dug for me.

I think affirmation is incredibly important because we internalize these negative messages about ourselves all the time. We get so few positive messages, especially from the dominant society around us. I taught at Fort Lewis where most of my students were Native American and I was like, “Enough of this I-can’t-do-this, I-can’t-do-this-academic-writing!” I created assignments that allowed them to enter academic writing through their culture. We did a lot of storytelling exercises and suddenly everybody was writing.

I became a better person and a better writer when people started telling me I was a good person. My whole life, I grew up hearing that I was a brat, I was lazy, I was a bitch, all these things. Now, when people in my professional life meet my family, they’re like, “She’s so warm and nice.” (laughs). They [Kali’s family] still don’t get it. Like, do you know the same person? That’s because I don’t have that reputation with them. I’m able to create my own reality. I think affirmation allows you to decide what kind of person you want to be. You can be that negative person or you can be a positive person.

You’ve also talked about breaking down this creative barrier in people and expressed how art making is not exclusive to privileged people. That’s been really hard because when you get into the higher levels of art, you find a lot of privileged people. The reason you do is because if you’re privileged, your parents have all this access to providing you with the best teachers, the best mentors and the best schooling. I didn’t have anything like that. You meet people who are able
to learn quicker than you because they were exposed to it early on, but that doesn’t mean you can’t achieve what they can achieve. You just have to be exposed to it at some point.

In Key West, I lived next door to these Greeks, they were jewelers and had a big huge family, like mine. They wanted to read my stories, so I printed them off and handed them over. A former friend was like, “You’re so weird, you’ll just give anybody your work.” And I thought, “Who cares?” My work is not exclusively for the elite; it’s for everybody. I might be able to move in elite circles if I want, but I can also go back to the communities that I come from and give back. I really like to visit and teach in different communities because I knew how hard it was for me to get here.

You’ve experienced a lot of frustration with research for your writings, realizing the limited or missing sources of information regarding the histories of your ancestors and those alike. What are some of the implications regarding the erasure of such histories?

To me it’s huge. We can’t even quantify what it means to have no recorded history from your people. One thing I’m finding out about white people is that, if they came from money or they came from status, their grandparents and great-grandparents were part of social clubs. These social clubs, like the KKK, had meetings, record keepers and minutes every week. My people were working, taking care of multiple children or an entire neighborhood. Nobody was showing up at their houses and taking down minutes and recording things like, how long it took my auntie to do house work all day and to feed all the children and cook all day. Nobody was doing that kind of thing. So when I’m working on my novel that’s set in the 30s and in the 1890s, a lot of the world that I have to create is based on what I was told that isn’t recorded anywhere.

Once I called a Colorado archive and told them, I have a story and I want to verify this story and I can’t find any record of this. My auntie Lucy said that when she was pregnant with one of her children, she was turned away from one the hospitals for being Mexican in the 1940s. She always blamed the fact that because she had to go to a different hospital, her baby was born disabled. I was trying get some information about the hospital’s policies from that time period, and the archivists said, “No, that never happened. We have no record of hospitals turning away Latinos or Black people or anything. That’s just not true.” I was pretty heartbroken because I wondered why my family would lie about such a thing?

But later, I visited the Black American West Museum over in Five Points and I was talking to the woman behind the counter, an elder. I mentioned that story to her and she said, “Do you think that people kept record of racism? No.” She said, “It doesn’t mean it was a hospital wide policy, it could have been the front desk clerk. That front desk clerk could have been racist and said, you can’t come in today. That could have altered your entire family line.”

Because we don’t have this recorded, we are functioning in a different plane of existence as people of color. It’s passed down knowledge, intuitive and based on trust. There’s a lot out there right now, believe women, believe people of color. Believe that what we
say is true. I think a lot of us have an extra sense and you can feel when those things are happening to you. That’s not something we can’t record, that I-have-a-bad-feeling sense.

You’ve experienced your fair share of rejection as well. Your short story, “Sabrina and Corina,” which is also the title of your upcoming book, was rejected by over 20 journals before finally being accepted. How do you remain so resilient?

I was reading “The New York Times: Book Review” today of Michelle Obama’s “Becoming” and I started crying in bed because she was talking about grit and resilience. I was like, “I know Michelle, it’s so hard!” I think my resilience comes from the fact that I was essentially rejected by my biological father when I was really young, which in some ways maybe made me addicted to rejection early on in life. It’s what I know.

When I started getting all this rejection as a writer, I was like, “You’ll see!” I had this essence in me, this you-can’t-hurt-me, I’ve already been hurt so much, you’re going to learn. When I do get an acceptance, I’m so grateful. But, now, when someone rejects one of my stories, I’m like, “Whatever!” (Laughs) I just got a pretty big rejection notice a couple of weeks ago. My agent called me and she was like, “It’s OK.” When I answered the phone, I said, “Well, hot damn! That was a good one, wasn’t it?” (Laughs).

Do you have any advice to those in school who may be unsure of themselves when it comes to writing, thinking it may not be for them?

I think if you’re not sure writing is for you, you need to find out what you think is for you. A mentor of mine, Alyson Hagy, just published a novel called “Scribe” and there was a line in there that said, “You have to have reasons behind being resilient. It’s
not enough just to want something, you have to have history and context behind your resiliency.” So, I would say, find what’s at stake for you. What was at stake for my writing was that, I felt like there was so much riding on my shoulders, if I did not get these books out, then our entire collective history wasn’t going to get out. And I know that’s not necessarily true, but it was what I had told myself and that was the story that I created.

I would tell young writers that they need to identify the story behind their resiliency. What is it that makes you keep going and pushing? Also, mentors are such a great way to learn and to learn quickly. So respect your elders, respect your mentors and keep in active-touch with people. Try to cultivate a network because let’s say I published a book and I had no network, I had no family or no community, maybe the book would do OK, but probably not. It helps to be good at what you do, so learn and just try to be a good person and try to be kind. And work really hard!

**Which books or authors inspired and pushed you to pursue a career in writing?**

When I was in high school, I had like a 1.3 GPA, and I begged the English teacher to let me into her AP English class because I wanted to read the books they were reading. She let me in and we read Flannery O’Connor, it was the first time I had been exposed to her, and we read “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” It was like something came down and I was like, “This is a worldview that’s hard and this is a world that’s ugly and it’s filled with injustice. That’s my world too!” I wrote this whole paper on it and then, that same English teacher told me to dropout of high school, so I did (Laughs). Flannery O’Connor was the first time that I had seen a woman writer represent a harsh fighting reality. I wanted my work to be like that. When

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A sample of the books that have influenced Kali over time. *left to right* “Geek Love” by Katherine Dunn, “Invisible Man” by Ralph Ellison, “3” by Flannery O’Connor and “Loose Woman: Poems” by Sandra Cisneros.
I was in high school, we read “House on Mango Street” by Sandra Cisneros and my teacher was from Hungary. He’s this wonderful man and I remember he was connecting his own life in Hungary to one of the vignettes in “House on Mango Street.” I just sat there, I didn’t even have this kind of consciousness, but I thought, wow, he is connecting to a Chicana’s story from Chicago and he’s from Hungary. It was such a strange cross of worlds and I realized, that’s the power of literature.

The power of literature is that, you can connect from anywhere in the world because it’s human. Later on, there were writers like Katherine Anne Porter and Richard Yates. I love writing that sounds beautiful, that has a flow to it that you can recite. I love the sound of words. I’m a huge reader and I could talk about this for a long time, but Flannery O’Connor and Sandra Cisneros were really distinct female voices that showed up at the right time and created this combination of things that I modeled my own voice after, until I was able to create my own.

Author Luis Urrea visited MSU Denver back in September for the 2018 Richard T. Castro Distinguished Visiting Professorship. I had the chance to speak with him prior, and he expressed to me how the act of writing, of being a scribe and storyteller, is a sacred one. Does this sentiment resonate with you?

I totally agree with that. In my family, there’s been a story keeper every generation and I didn’t know it was me until later. I hope that there are more in the family, but it feels like a blessed gift from my ancestors. When I got my book deal, I broke down crying and the very second thing I did was say, “Thank you, ancestors!” Because I couldn’t do this by myself. This work came from such a long line of people, striving toward something for generations.

**What do you want readers to take away from your writings?**

I want my work to comfort people, to make them feel less lonely. I want them to see that I’m talking about the violence in our culture. I’m talking about what’s happened to us for generations. I see you; I recognize you.

I think there’s a lot of power and affirmation in being recognized and noticed, so I want people to feel like if this writer can do it, I can do it too. I guess my main goal is, I want to get other people writing and telling stories no matter what kind of form it takes. Whether it’s video, visual art or writing. I want to unlock within other storytellers, the ability to tell their stories.

*This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

kalifajardoanstine.com
@kalimaja
@KaliMaFaja
SUBMISSION

WIREDSTEIN

ZINE BY MADISON FAULKNER
PHOTOS BY METROSPHERE
WIRESTED ELN
A note on my artistic process:

I find humor from the numerous auto corrections sent to me from my father. I was inspired by one misspelling in particular and defined it as follows:

**Wiredstein** (noun)

A life philosophy that adopts the adoration of small, imperfect details resulting in a more positive outlook on life.

After scrolling through months of conversations with my father, I selected my favorite mistakes and printed them. I cut the lines of text apart, threw them into the air then rearranged the strips in the order I had picked them back up in. The resulting poem has morphed into the remainder of this book.

Wiredstein.
Maybe we go pha
Die today
It takes work and luke.

I am confidant
I am the bling about hiking
As tomboy get sick
Forfeit be me
Wiredstein.
confidant
confidant
confidant
confidant
confidant
get sick
The genre of fantasy is responsible for a plethora of popular works and has a huge fanbase to back it up. Just think of the many shows, books and movies that are commonly known and referred to within our culture. With so much recognition, you could argue that the one arena fantasy doesn’t get much respect in is within the fine arts. Whatever the reason may be, MSU Denver student and artist Lucas Stine is making strides to disrupt such notions. With his primary focus in sculpture, Lucas has found a way to integrate his interests in painting and literature in an effort to build a 3-dimensional world rich with narrative. Lucas is as much productive with his craft as he is nerdy with his fantasy based lifestyle. I met with Lucas on Jan. 4 at his home and studio in Ruby Hill, where we talked about the craft of sculpture, “World of Warcraft,” making art accessible and his future ambitions.
Estevan Ruiz: You’re pursuing a BFA in Art with a concentration in spatial media here at MSU Denver. Prior to that, you pursued an education in script writing over at the Colorado Film School. What were your initial goals and what led to the switch?

Lucas Stine: Well, it wasn’t necessarily by my choice. Colorado Film School dropped their four-year program. They had a partnership with Regis University and they dropped it right in the middle, so I just got a two-year degree and that’s all I could do, which was a shame. I did computer science at Metro and I absolutely hated it! At Colorado Film School, I had so much creative freedom. Everyone there was really close knit, and they really put in the effort on a lot of things. It was really cool to work on a collaborative process and a team to get a good final product. The thing about Colorado Film School was that it was really technical too, so they taught you all kinds of software programs. I really enjoyed that program, and I would probably still be doing that. I didn’t want to just be like, “Oh great, I got my two-year degree, let me go work at the Denver Open Media,” or something like that.

Switching to the fine art program, I tried industrial design for a little bit at Metro. I’m not a designer, I have an eye for design, but I don’t want to design chairs and furniture, I want to make monsters and gross stuff (Laughs). For a long time you’ve also practiced as an illustrator and painter, now you’re primarily making sculptures. What do you find so fascinating with the medium?

Well, I paint all my sculptures too. I think having that trompe l’oeil in the scale also gives you a certain level of technical skill with painting for sculptures. I have so much more fun with sculpture because I get to paint realistic details to the point where if it started to move it would be believable. Sculpture, for me, is much more alive. I think doing sculpture allows me to create a product I like a lot more than creating an intricate illustration. Especially when I get to combine all three skills when I get to sketch it up, paint the final product and make this living, breathing object.

You had said you caught the fantasy bug through video games, most notably “World of Warcraft.” Now you’re sculpting 1/6 scale figures based around this genre. When did your interest evolve from appreciation to creation?

I’ve been drawing forever, and at the time I was drawing really shitty anime drawings of “World of Warcraft” stuff. I saw this amazing Chinese fan art
involving “Warcraft III” and “World of Warcraft.” They did these hyper-stylized images and I was blown away. I wanted to touch on that, but I didn’t want to make fan art. I slowly started to move more into my own world building and narratives because I think that I have something interesting enough to say (Laughs). I have some interesting ideas that I’ve got to get out and people seem to like them.

Fantasy is not limited to your art, it’s also a lifestyle for you. You work for and have contributed to the fantasy figure collective ‘Eavier Metal, you play “Dungeons & Dragons,” you’re covered with genre related tattoos and listen to appropriate music as well. What do you find so captivating about the genre? Fantasy was this real nice escapism for me. My parents didn’t let me watch “The Simpsons” growing up, so I would read books. I could read fantasy books and of course that content isn’t censored, it’s not like a parent reads the whole book before you and is like, “Oh sorry, somebody got killed in chapter three, you can’t read this!” I had a lot of escapism through books and video games.

I’ve started thinking that I appreciate fantasy because you can put these morals and ideas in there and no one bats an eyelash because it’s fantasy. One of the big examples was the original “Star Trek.” They had the first interracial kiss on TV and it was fantasy. I think it was still a very big deal, but it took a fantasy show to do that. It wasn’t anything else. I think you can really push the boundaries of what is acceptable in society through fantasy. I mean, of course you’re always going to have those people that complain that “Harry Potter” is made by the devil and all that stuff. But to me, I really like it because you can say whatever you want. You can put in whatever you want into it and then make the subject matter correspond with that.
In a sense, it seems like sculpting is augmenting that video game experience for you. It’s not just on this screen anymore, now you’re actually physically involved with the 3D model. I’ve been doing a little bit of digital sculpting as well. I just built a new PC and I have it all set up for digital sculpting and have been using a lot of ZBrush. The last couple of semesters I was 3D printing a lot of sculpting pieces, too. I want to move more towards that, but a lot of the people that I’ve talked to have told me to master traditional sculpting first and then move on to digital 3D—then the sculptures will be much more dynamic.

That makes sense because you’ll know what to look for and how to have control over it. I’m curious about the 3D printing aspect, do you think that technology is at a point where you can render things to a high level of craftsmanship?

I think even better sometimes. I mean there are some really good traditional sculptors, but there’s still that dexterity that comes into it and tool use. When I’m working, I make my own clay mixture because I know what I need in it. You have to understand how those mediums work. I might use three or four different kinds of clay, and I have to understand how all of them work. But on a digital program you know that when you use a certain tool, it’s going to behave in a certain way.

Like if I take a clay piece and scratch it a little bit, you’re going to get these little burrs on it and this kind of film on the pieces, then you have to burnish it down. In digital sculpting, you don’t have to worry about that. I’m getting a little bit faster at digital sculpting, but I think I’m still faster traditionally. I can knock out one of these little 1/6 scale heads in about an hour or so.

How have your spatial media studies at MSU Denver impacted your productivity?

I think it’s made my work smarter. When I was going into school, I was painting toys. I was doing repaints on stuff. Now I’ve focused more on that “100 percent, I had a hand in it, start to finish” kind of thing. In some aspects it slowed me down on little things because sometimes you have to meet the assignment standards. A lot of times I would dream really big where I’m like, “Oh, I want to do this and this and this and this,” then I have to cut it back a bit and might not always be as proud of the final work as I would be if I had no deadlines and more time.

I do think that the degree has really helped me though. I don’t want to put a lot of theory into my work, but I can have it there and I can not feel like a complete dip shit when I’m in a fine art setting. I can still bring some of my pieces into a fine art setting though, and I would have the knowledge about why I brought it.

I admire the fact that your figures are original characters, each with their own story. How does narrative play a role into your art making?

To make it believable, the figures have to exist in a world with different weather patterns. So is this world hot? Will that make the character sunburned? Will they have chapped lips? And that all goes into my figures because it adds more character into them. As I’m working on them, their bodies will tell a story without even having any clothes or anything on them. Then by the time you add the clothes
and everything else, it might hammer in what that world is like.

Adding the narrative aspect of these figures and coming up with these backstories helps me sculpt them because then I can sit there and explain that this figure is some type of warrior and that’s why he has these scars on his face and this tattoo on his lips. It lets me add these really interesting details.

Your figures are very detailed and you mentioned that you also create your own fabrics and accessories. Are these supplemental to the story that goes along with the character?

My mom is huge into knitting. She was really excited that I’m starting to sew and knit, so she knit me tiny little scarves and gave them to me for Christmas. Now I have little scarves and little head wraps and things like that. So I think that’s nice because the clothing is what takes the absolute longest. It’s such a pain in the ass because I’m not a very good sewer. I know what I want and when you’re not good with a medium, it’s hard to get what is in your brain out onto it when you just don’t have the skill for it.

You eventually want to get into creating more environmental landscapes too?

Yeah, definitely. I’m eventually going to have a green screen setup so I can take photos. I’ll have a whole scenery built and be able to wheel it in and out, then I can rotate what I put in there. But again, I’m a little short on real estate. Surface space in here is very coveted and I think half of it is because I just can’t stop collecting shit (Laughs).

You named the renowned mech sculptor Kow Yokoyama as an influence. Back in the 80s, he created the science-fiction universe called “Maschinen Krieger ZbV 3000” and conveys this narrative through figures...
and a comic series.
Yeah! He just makes stuff nonstop. Once a month he has commercial releases where he’ll sell a sculpted kit and then in between that, he’s got dozens of other things. It’s like the idle hands thing, where you just have to be working. Sometimes I’m like that, but I don’t know, I got other stuff to do. I’ve got friends to hang out with. I can’t just be in my studio nonstop (Laughs).

At some point though, once I’m not focusing all this creative effort and energy towards school, all that time in the day would just be towards me and my own work. I think at that point when I’m making solely for myself or for other clients, I’ll be able to keep producing a lot.

You also have the same ambitions of building a world with your characters through sculpture and comics. Can you tell me more about that?
Once I have the green screen setup, I would like to take still panels and have my figures interacting in there. I already know the story, but I want to share that story with everyone else. They can kind of get it from seeing the figures, but I think the style of the figures having this extra level of being posable and maneuverable, is really how they’re meant to be used. If I just have them standing there doing nothing, it’s a very static piece. But when you put them into this living, breathing universe, then you can see how they would interact over different scenarios and settings. That’s what I want to do.

I really enjoy narrative storytelling. I think it’s really fun to have this ongoing narrative story that I have some say in, but then it can change. Like with Kow Yokoyama and “Maschinen Krieger,” he put his figures out there and people can paint them however they want. There’s another guy who takes his [Yokoyama’s] figures, makes his own custom versions of them and then sells

right
A sculpted head made by Lucas’ mentor, Spanish artist and head of Banshee Miniature Art Academy, Alfonso Giraldes, during his past visit to Lucas’ home-studio.

overleaf
An array of tools and sculpted heads, some of which have already been painted. This is Lucas’ primary workstation in his home-studio.
custom versions of those kits. I think having that fluidity of the universe and genre, once you put it out there, is important too.

Like “World of Warcraft,” going back to video games, they put the world out there, but how the players interacted with it and what the players did, that’s what made those narratives and stories. Early on in the game, when they got the ‘blood plague’ and transferred it to all the other players and kept killing them, the CDC was looking into it because they wanted to see how large population areas would deal with infectious diseases, like a pandemic situation. When Blizzard made the game, they had no intention that that could even happen. And then all of a sudden because of how the players interacted and what they did, they completely changed how the game was supposed to be viewed and seen.

The idea behind your comic is that you would take photos of your figures, in action poses, and then lay that out to form the narrative?
Yep! I’ve debated about having it be online and then once the book runs, you’d be able to get a hard copy, depending on interest. But if it was online, I could have a lot more multimedia incorporated in it because I can start playing around with the idea of a comic book format. I could have sound and whatever, so when you view the comic it might have something flickering or things like that. Almost like you’re looking at a storyboard for a movie that’s coming alive.

There are some stigmas when it comes to the narrative tropes of fantasy. For example, usually there’s a plot based on good versus evil or a coming of age for the protagonist. With regards to your world and the story, how would that either defy or reinforce such ethos?
Once it’s in other people’s hands, I don’t have much of a say in it, if it ever got to that point. But in my world, I don’t like the good versus evil narrative because I think it’s a lie told to us. I don’t think there’s ever anybody that’s 100 percent evil versus somebody who’s 100 percent good. I think even if you’re the most altruistic person in the world, you have your own motives at times. People are people. There’s human nature and it just has these swings.

In my thesis work, I’m really exploring these gray areas of human nature to show that there isn’t good and evil. You can have good actions one day, but then you can go around and have evil actions another day. I don’t think you have this set alignment like, “I am a lawful good person, I follow the law and I’m nice to people.” You can have that all the time but then, I mean, who knows what they’re thinking? Even then, what law is just? I explore that again in one of my pieces where I’m talking about law enforcement. We might give law enforcement all of this power to do things, but is it OK when we’re watching somebody get shot in the street for selling loose cigarettes?

I’m trying to pose hard hitting questions to challenge these set morality issues. In my universe, I want to pose that there’s not really good or evil, it’s survival. Not in the complete sense of that because somebody could be nice to you one day because it’s in their best interest. If they’re a jerk to you that may come down to a level of survival. In my universe of course, the elements and everything in it are hyper
distorted so that way it highlights that idea. Especially in the “Dying Earth 2113” series [the title of Lucas’ upcoming thesis project], somebody might be nice to you for a little while to get something. It’s not that I have this amoral worldview, but I want to highlight and show that.

With fantasy tropes, when you watch any bad fantasy movie, there’s always an evil Lord with all these goblins and he’s going to take over the world and sacrifice a princess because he’s bad. He’s like Skeletor like, “Ah I hate He-Man!” That’s all their motivation. If you want to write good characters, you need to make them human and Skeletor is not human. His only mission is to thwart He-Man, that’s very one dimensional. If I’m going to make these universes and these characters, you might relate to the antagonist sometimes, you might relate to the protagonist other times, it just depends.

Fantasy based games like “Magic: The Gathering” and “World of Warcraft,” explore this notion of moral ambiguity. The idea being that the users are the individuals who create their own story based off of their own choices and intentions. You touched on how that plays a role in your world building and your upcoming thesis project, challenging preconceived notions of human nature and behavior. Tell me more about that.

I think I pick on it a lot because we have this theocratic law system in America. A lot of the time people equate religion with morality and I don’t necessarily think that’s the case. Religion isn’t always justice. I mean, you see it here in America with the way that the government might treat anybody who’s not a white Christian. You see it in the Middle East where there’s certain countries that have religious law that rules the land. So you can obviously see that it’s not justice or morality. But it can really warp people to see it that way.

You can get Christians in America that are sitting here screaming that we need to build a wall, and how is that moral? In my work, I want to play into these ideas of where exactly is this power coming from, who is saying it and why is it being said? But using a fantasy setting to critique that. I don’t want to just make political art. (Laughs) As a white male, I don’t want to just be screeching into the void like, “My political opinions are really valid, listen to me!” We have enough of that today. I’d rather make something I think people could relate to on some level at first and then all of a sudden, start getting this other meaning out of it.

You sell your casts to let others develop their own iterations and perspective as a form of collaboration. Is this a way to open up your world and have a democratic contribution to your story?

Yea definitely! I might make a character that, in my opinion, is the protagonist. This might be somebody who goes through the story, experiences everything and has generally, what I would consider, a better outlook. I think at some level people want to have a character that does good in the world. You don’t want to watch total anti-hero movies or comics. Even though it’s been popular with shows like “Dexter” and “The Sopranos,” they still have these human characteristics that make you like them. Imagine watching “Friday the 13th” from Jason’s point of view and it’s
just a first person view of somebody murdering teenagers. That’s not interesting. So I want to make it from the protagonist’s point of view, but if somebody were to take my protagonist and turn them into the bad guy, I’d be fine with that. What’s to say that there couldn’t be something that pushes and pulls him?

That’s why I want to put my pieces out there. I also want to make art accessible. Everything doesn’t have to be the super fine art thing. I can sell a cast or a bust of whatever and then see how people have painted or decorated it on their own. I’m actually writing an article for a magazine about that right now, for “The Illustrated Fantasy Artist.” The article is about making characters your own. Taking a preexisting cast or sculpt and turning it into your own work, even changing the idea. That’s what I’ve been working on a lot. If I get a historical piece of a pirate for example, maybe I’ll give him a bionic eye and turn him into a future cyberpunk character or something. It’s a nice exercise and it really pushes how you can see characters and put them in different situations.

What is your perspective on some of the pros and cons of making art accessible? I could see a pro being more interactions with audiences, but a con being that it may become too kitsch.

I had a blast doing the “666: Number of the Beast” show at Trve Brewing. People were excited to pick up art from artists in the community. It didn’t matter that a lot of it was lowbrow, people were just excited to have art. I want to make art accessible. If I wanted to sculpt and make kitschy stuff, I could go work for Hasbro or something and sculpt “Transformers.” I don’t want to do that. I want to still stay in that weird niche of, “you kind of have to know about it to get it.” It’s not going to be on the shelf at Walmart.
I say that now, of course, but then 10 years down the road I’m offered some ludicrous contract to make “Transformers” (Laughs).

So far, it’s been good to be able to make things in my own universe on my own terms. That’s not to say that I haven’t made some commissions, but I think I’ve been skirting around that kitschy area, even though a lot of them [Lucas’ sculptures] are collectible. It’s still not quite as mainstream as something that I consider a kitschy object. The hard part though is to be taken seriously in the fine art world because if you all of a sudden say, “Well, I make casts of my artwork and I want to sell this and do this.” People are like, “What? You don’t only display at this gallery or do this thing?”

I’ve always been of the mindset that I’d rather make art and get paid for it. It doesn’t have to be that feast-or-famine of trying to get a show at this gallery and putting all your eggs in one basket. If you have an online shop that’s doing great, more power to you. My mindset, basically a casting is just a print of a piece that people can do whatever they want to do with it. You wouldn’t get a print of a painting and then draw mustaches on all of them. Maybe, but it’d be something rare. Whereas the intent of my pieces are for somebody to personalize it and make it their own. I think that aspect speaks to the many DIY initiatives of our current culture. More and more artists are doing things independently and on their own terms. There are also some smaller galleries who are making more of an effort to support DIY artists. Maybe having a niche is what will help that progression for more collaborative and interactive types of art?

It’s like the weird fan fiction that you put out in the dark corner of the Internet. If something gets too big, someone’s not going to draw their own Ironman comic and try to get it published because it’s too big. Marvel would sue them, shut it down, whatever. But there are certain things where at some point, people will collaborate if it’s in this mid-tier niche, where it’s known and then people want to make things about it. Sometimes you get fan art, sometimes you get whatever, but I want the world to be more interactive. I’ll set these parameters and have people work within that.

One of the big examples I can think of is H.P. Lovecraft. His concepts were really good and that’s why you still have people making original content about “Cthulhu” because it’s interesting. It’s this interesting universe that he’s set up, but he filled it full of all of this racist bullshit and people were like, “Yeah, right, you’re an OK writer, whatever!” But once people got their own hands on it and made their own iterations of that, it was way more interesting. They had this living, breathing universe that was the backdrop and then they set their own characters in there and messed around with that. We’re seeing a lot more Lovecraftian things in games and TV shows.

Post graduation, do you have any goals or plans for the next five to 10 years? I’ve been debating that because I kind of want a master’s degree, but I’m not sure. I’m also debating on taking a little hiatus, going and working in Europe for a little while. I have a lot of good friends over there and there’s a really good art scene, especially for fantasy
art. It could be something where I could go leaps and bounds in skill level, but it would definitely be more of a hobby styling. The other thing I’ve been thinking about is trying to apply for some position doing special effects or maquette sculpting for movies. Maybe even training somewhere, like with Stan Winston. People training with him already have some skill, but then they really hone their skills with him. I think something like that could be a really useful step for me.

My dream would be to go work for a company like Weta Workshop and design monsters and robots all day. They’re really picky about who they hire, and they hire like 16 people a year and they’re pretty much all from New Zealand (laughs). So we’ll see. I’m not super worried because I’m still going to keep working on my own projects and I’m really going to try to take off with a comic book and with more casts. On my own, I’d like to hone my skills and practice. I want to keep getting better and faster. I want to be able to make literally anything with my own two hands.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

@yo_felly_b

Lucas is meticulous with his process and often sculpts human skulls in an effort to keep his technique sharp.
SUBMISSION

POEM COLLECTION

WRITTEN BY RYDER PITTZ
ARTWORK BY METROSPHERE
THE FLEETINGNESS OF IT ALL

a dearth of self awakens tonight among the ether and nominal sunset,

soaring and wailing with the scattered doves, frightened by its own trepidation.

beside me lingers a vestige of the future yet to come and an apparition of history already wrought.

none understand, though all comprehend the power, the weight of transference.

The clock ticks and groans with its contractual burden, counting down existence until it is wound again.

the scale and key of individual suffering is exacerbated by those with aristocratic leaning.

Fortune favors the meek, alone and unforgiving, for when I die I shall never exist again, any glory had forgotten with the doves.

WRITTEN BY: RYDER PITZ
IN THE FREEZING RAIN RIDES THE PALE HORSE

situational ecstasy
slams me like a door
a door of glass windows and
oakishly
hyperbolic hallucinations.
it’s midnight in lower downtown
and approaching is the gentry,
keeping awake the populace
with night terrors
consisting of high rent condos
and sushi restaurants.
My arms are tattooed,
covered with parking attendants
and used bookstores,
panera breads and
slam poetry readings.
old school bohemia has
become the new chic, but
the wanderlust is only possible
when connected to
trust funds.
through mahogany entrance
of a lavish
country club
heated debates arise among
armani suits
and twenty-five dollar martinis
about the impending crisis of the homeless.
what, may i ask, can
possibly be done,
when our undeniable riches
expose our poverty?
SONGS FROM THE HYMNAL

Loretta, she's moving down the fire escape, gracing the city waiting to dote upon her presence. with fortuitous style and name she struts down alleyways, past dumpster balls and past the incident on Fifty-seventh street, to the tributary coastline, as quiet as it's ever been,

Loretta, her spirit is tossed out the window forgotten as the leaves come tumbling down. old bones and cheap whiskey echo in the vein of bygone cowboy songs, hymns whispered and tangled in the maze of her catacombs.

Loretta, she peers into the great American desert, it rings in the midst of skyscrapers, staring down the myth of the well-wrought urn.

she cannot find what it is she's looking for
ARTIST STATEMENT

This small collection is selected not in conjunction with a particular theme or motif, but rather as a snippet of my recent portfolio, touched, perhaps with politics and timeless and relatable subjects.
LOOKING FOR AN OPPORTUNITY
TO SHOWCASE YOUR WORK?

Metrosphere is currently accepting submissions for the 2018/2019 school year! We encourage all genres and mediums of literary works and visual art. We are particularly interested in showcasing series of works! Get your work published and be featured as part of MSU Denver’s emerging art scene!

Please include an artist statement with all submissions, including your name, major and year in school.

Send all submissions to submission.metrosphere@gmail.com

If you’re in need of guidance or have any questions, please reach out to us. We’re here to help!

For a detailed list of submission guidelines and requirements, please visit mymetmedia.com/metrosphere and click on GUIDELINES
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SHOW 2
April 26–May 10, 2019
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April 26, 6–8 p.m.

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